

REMARKS

1607/3192.

UPON THE NOTION OF

EXTRAORDINARY IMPULSES AND IMPRESSIONS

ON THE

IMAGINATION,

Indulged by many

PROFESSORS OF RELIGION;

CONTAINED IN

A Letter to a Friend.

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REMARKS, &c.

MY DEAR FRIEND,

Since I saw you last, I have frequently thought of you with much concern, and sincerely wish you divine support under all your trials, and direction in all your embarrassing concerns. As I make no doubt of your being a partaker of divine grace, I believe the Lord will in the issue, bring you safely through all your troubles. Yet, if I may speak my mind freely, I am jealous over you, lest you should increase your own distresses and lessen the benefit you might receive from them, by some mistakes into which you seem in danger of falling.

You remember the account you gave me of *your receiving many promises from God*, particularly respecting your *temporal circumstances*; and that you expressed the strongest *confidence* of their *literal* and punctual fulfilment. Perhaps you will think me your enemy, should I endeavour to rob you of any part of the consolation you have derived from this source. However, bear with me till you have heard me out; and I trust it will appear, that I do not wish to usurp dominion over your faith, but to be a helper of your joy.

I rejoice that you are enabled to abound in *prayer*, and thereby to make your request known unto God, being desirous to cast all your care upon him, and to derive instruction and support from his word. I am fully assured, that the word of God will be found a sufficient directory, in all cases whatever; and a source of equal comfort, under the greatest trials.



It is your duty and privilege to *search* the scriptures daily, both for direction and consolation; and to endeavor, when you cannot have the Bible in your hand, to *recollect* the precepts and promises, and meditate upon them: praying that the Holy Spirit would not only assist your natural power of recollection, but more especially that he would give you a *spiritual understanding* of his word, and an *answerable frame of heart*, properly affected with the various truths therein contained.

You have reason to bless God for the suitable provision he has made in his Word, which, I gladly allow, is as exactly suited to your case, as if the words had been spoken to you individually; though blessed be God, the same word of truth is equally suited to all other believers: and you have no more cause to complain of *this*, than you have to complain, that while the Sun warms and enlightens *you*, as much as if you lived alone on the earth, it affords the same benefits to millions more at the same time.

You ought to be thankful that God has given you a *memory*, and assists you, from time to time, to recollect suitable passages of scripture, which sometimes occur to your mind, in a very apt and seasonable manner. But, perhaps, this observation will rather displease you; and you will hardly allow that you do *recollect* them, but think they are *immediately suggested* to you from God. However if your memory is like mine, it will be very difficult to prove this point. I have, many a time, had good things and bad suddenly occur to my mind, which at first I thought I had never read or heard before, and yet have afterwards

found out where I first met with them. And, be this as it may, it is a matter of *no consequence* at all, whether God assists my natural faculties in recollecting his word, or immediately suggests it. The bare suggestion of words to the mind would not necessarily be accompanied with the exercise of grace; for Balaam, and other natural men, have had wonderful things told them by God himself, and yet had no grace at all in their hearts. And, on the other hand, if my memory, or twenty other natural faculties of body or soul, were made use of, in bringing the word of God to my mind, yet if I had at the same time the real exercise of grace, I might be assured that *that* was owing wholly to the Spirit of God.

I therefore wish you, and all christians, to ground your consolation not on the **MANNER** in which the promises are brought to the mind, but on the **MATTER** contained in the promises themselves. It is unsafe for persons to think themselves Christians, because they have had promises brought *suddenly* to their minds, as if *a voice* spoke them, when they did *not know* there were any such words in the book. The suddenness proves nothing, either one way or other; the voice is probably formed by the strength of their own imagination; and if it really came from heaven, would be no surer than the written word was before: and as to their not knowing the words were in the book, that is the worst sign of all; for it only proves they have not read their bibles so much as they ought to have done. Whereas, suppose you were to take any one plain promise of the gospel, and read it over ten times a day, for twelve months together; if upon the last day

of the year, after reading it 3650 times, you found your mind enlightened to discern its real, original meaning, were persuaded of its certain truth, and made to embrace it as good, sincerely and earnestly desiring the enjoyment of the blessings therein contained, for the same ends for which they were promised; and depending on the faithfulness of the promiser for the fulfilment of his gracious engagement; thus being excited to give up your heart to him: if you had felt no emotion of the kind for 3649 times that you had read the words before, and if at last your comfort came in ever so slowly, you might nevertheless be safely assured that it came from God.

But at this time I meant chiefly to speak of the promises of *temporal blessings*, of which you seemed to be so confident, that God had made them to you in particular, and would accordingly undoubtedly fulfil them. Now it is a certain and comfortable truth, that “Godliness ~~is~~ profitable for all things, having the promise of the life that now is, as well as of that which is to come.” 1 Tim. iv. 8. But verily my dear friend, *I have no notion that God has made one promise of temporal blessings to you, but what is common to all believers in similar circumstances.* Herein you seem to me to be in great danger of mistakes, and such as will probably lead you into other considerable errors, if they are not rectified. Christian friendship, therefore induces me to use freedom and plainness on this head.

Before the canon of scripture was closed, God made known his will at sundry times, and in divers manners, to many of his servants, by way of immediate revelation. He made various par-

ticular events known before hand to Abraham, and Joseph, and David, and others; and gave them promises which belonged to them exclusively; and could not be safely applied to any other. For instance, he promised to Abraham, that his seed should be as the sand of the sea for multitude; and that all nations of the earth should be blessed in his seed &c. He engaged that Joseph should be exalted above his brethren, and all his father's house. He foretold, that David should be himself seated on the throne of Israel; and afterwards swore unto him, that of the fruit of his loins he would raise up the Messiah to sit upon his throne. God also made new revelations to bad men, as well as to the godly; to Pharaoh, to Balaam, to Jeroboam, to Jehu, to Ahaz, and Nebuchadnezzar &c.

But we who have now the whole bible to direct and support us, are not encouraged to expect or desire *new* revelations; but it is our duty to make use of the *perfect* revelation which God has already made, and put into our hands: and I must insist upon it, that it is so full and perfect, that you cannot need any addition to it.

The *precepts* of the Bible are so plain and full, that if we have but a single eye to the divine glory, they will in all cases be found a *sufficient directory*, as to every branch of duty. Indeed had I ever so much grace and spiritual understanding, the Bible would *not* tell me what will come to pass next year, nor even what will take place to-morrow. It will not tell me whether I shall be rich or poor in futurity; whether I shall continue in my present circumstances, or alter my outward condition within any limited period: it will not inform me whether I shall live long, or die soon;

nor will it assist me to predict a thousand events which my curiosity would like to know. But it will do that which is ten thousand times better; it will direct me to be concerned, that whether I live, I may live to the Lord; or if I die, that I may die in the Lord; it will teach me to acknowledge God in all my ways, and encourage me to cast all my care upon him; it will tell me that my times are in his hands, and excite me to bless the Lord at all times. It will not absolutely inform me of *what* God will do, as to any of my outward concerns; but it will assure me, that if I am a Christian indeed, he will deal well with me; he will surely do me good: and it will teach me, that as I know not what is good for me, of all that is before me, I ought, in whatsoever state I am, therewith to be content. Surely it is *much better* for me to know what I ought to do to day, than to know what will come to pass to morrow. I had much rather know the *duties* of one hour, and have a heart to do them, than have a revelation of all the future events of my life. Now I am thoroughly convinced of this important truth, which I dare confidently assert and maintain, viz. *That Common Sense, a Bible, and a Right Spirit, will always inform a Christian what is present duty.* They will not always direct him to *action*, because his present duty may be *patient waiting*. They will not inform him, how he may certainly avoid a variety of troubles, (though they will probably assist him to escape many difficulties, with which he would otherwise meet) but they will teach him how to glorify God, by bearing all unavoidable troubles in a becoming manner.

Thus also the supports and consolations of the Bible will be found quite sufficient for every christian in the sorest troubles. Place me in the worst situation that ever a child of God was in, and let God only enable me truly to understand and fully to realize, what he has already said, in his *good old revelation*, and I should have support and comfort enough; I should need no new revelation to make me easy. By the OLD revelation, I mean the scriptures in their original sense and meaning, understood as saying *nothing more to me than what they say to all christians in the like circumstances*; so that every other christian would learn just the same things from them which I do, if he had but an equal measure of spiritual light.—By a NEW revelation, I intend all sorts of *impressions* concerning supposed facts, not already discovered in scripture; or concerning future events, not already foretold: whether these impressions are made in the words of scripture: or by any other words, strongly fixed on the mind. If detached sentences of scripture are made use of, that makes the case none the better, unless the sense gathered from them was originally contained in the Bible.

Perhaps you will stand me out, that you have known some such instances of these sort of impressions being fulfilled, that I can never persuade you they are always delusive. As to myself, I only say, that I have no better opinion of *these* tales, than I have of tales concerning *ghosts* and apparitions. I should not care to affirm, that no man, in any one instance whatsoever, really saw an apparition; but I believe that out of an hundred such tales, half of them are barefaced lyes, and probably forty-nine of the other half were

merely the effect of a strong imagination; and if one in an hundred should be true, I do not wish to experience the truth of either kind of wonders myself: nor have I any more desire to receive a true new *revelation*, than I have to receive a visit from a real *ghost*.

However, I must be more positive in maintaining, that, supposing them both to be real, there is no more token of *grace* in the one case than in the other. Indeed it is possible that a new revelation, if it were really made to a good man, might be *attended* with the exercise of grace; and so might his seeing an apparition. But it is certainly a *far better* evidence of grace, for a man to bear up under trials, by means of scriptural consolation, while he is uncertain of future events, than for him to be supported and comforted by the certain foreknowledge of some agreeable change in his outward circumstances.

Suppose you were in a state of poverty, and, being greatly distressed on that account, were to be relieved by an express revelation, that some distant relation would soon die, and leave you a large fortune; I think verily you would not have the opportunity of exercising such grace, and giving God such glory, as another person, who, though as poor and afflicted as yourself, should yet be composed and resigned to the will of God, notwithstanding he had no expectation of any remarkable alteration of circumstances in his favor; but who should rely on the providence of God, to supply him with absolute necessities, submitting to his wisdom and sovereignty, and rejoicing that he had chosen the poor of this world, to be rich in faith, and heirs of his kingdom.

I wish you my dear friend, to pray earnestly for more spiritual understanding of the good old revelation already made; be content that the Bible has said already, to all believers, enough to support them in the worst distresses, and do not indulge a wish to make it say more than it has said. There is much instruction and consolation treasured up therein, with which we have as yet but a very imperfect acquaintance; let us study that; leaving secret things to the Lord, and being thankful that he has given us such an ample revelation of his holy will.

It is more flattering to *spiritual pride* to hold an immediate dialogue with the Almighty, and to foretel our own future prosperity, and I know not what besides, than to study the plain word of God, and learn no more from it than what all our christian brethren might learn by the same means: and indeed this tendency of such sort of impressions is one great objection to them. But the other method is much more honorable to God, and to his written word, more favorable to the exercise of grace, and, in the issue, more comfortable and safe for ourselves. At best, I may be mistaken as to these new revelations, but the old can never prove false. If I were unmarried, and desirous of changing my circumstances in life, a revelation of my certain success in courtship might dissappoint me; but an assurance that God would perform the thing that he had appointed for me, could not. If I were in poverty, a promise of riches might fail, but a promise that God will add all that is really needful, to them who seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, cannot deceive me.

If I were under trials, an impression that they should have an end at a given period, might fail; but a promise that they shall issue, some way or other, to the glory of God, and to my real welfare, cannot fail, for God has insured this to all them that love him, who have been called according to his purpose.

Since I was first acquainted with religion, I have known many instances of the sad consequences of giving heed to *Impulses*, both in those that I believe were truly gracious, and in others whom I could not but suspect to be destitute of divine grace. I have seen repeated instances of persons carried away by these *Impressions*, who have appeared, for a long time, exceedingly confident of the fulfilment of these imaginary promises, respecting certain events which they desired; but yet instead of calmly waiting God's time for their accomplishment, they have been subject to the *most violent and disorderly sallies of passion*, upon any appearance of a disappointment; even while they have professed to retain their confidence that God had indeed said such and such things to them:—a sad indication to me, that their faith in that particular, was not the gift of God. And when real Christians, as I verily believe, have for a while been drawn into such snares, how have they been tempted to throw away all their experience, good and bad together, when events have taken place quite contrary to their expectation! I wish to use all possible tenderness in attempting to rectify mistakes of this kind, but I have sometimes had cause to repent not speaking my mind more plainly and fully.

I pray, therefore, my friend, that you may be contented with enquiring into present duty, and satisfied with the stores of consolation already treasured up in the divine word, as the common stock of the people of God. Perhaps, you are ready to reply: Well, but then the Bible will not assure me to the contrary, but that I may be as poor as Job, or as Lazarus. Very true; it will not secure you from any one affliction to which other believers are liable; but however as it assures you the Lord will never fail you, nor forsake you; that he will cause all things to work together for your good; that though for the present, if need be, you may be in heaviness, through manifold temptations; yet the trial of your faith, being more precious than that of gold which perisheth, though it be tried with fire, will be found to glory, and honor, and praise, at the appearing of Jesus Christ; you will, in the issue, find cause to say this is enough; God has spoken in his holiness, and I will rejoice, since he in all things shall be glorified.

Hoping you will take all my freedom in good part, I subscribe myself *yours &c.*

Northampton,
May, 1784.

AGNOSTOS.

P. S. The writer of the preceding Letter, who has now revised it, would refer the Reader, that may wish more thoroughly to investigate the subject to President EDWARDS's Treatise on the *Affections*; p. 77, 78, and 119—126 &c. 188 &c. Edinburgh Edition, 1772. And to another work too little known, written by the same Author, entitled *Thoughts on the Revival of Religion*, in New England, 1742. p. 133—140. All which part is omitted by Mr. Westley in his Abridgement, published in 1745, which is in other instances *greatly mutilated*: as particularly in the omission of the Illustration of the Nature of the Work in a particular instance, p. 35—44. which account is very extraordinary: there is room to conclude the person was Mrs. Sarah Edwards the Author's Wife.

Cowley and Field, Printers, Bristol.



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